

Notes on the Church in the Dioceses of Sodor and Argyll

ANNIE I. DUNLOP, D.LITT.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century the dioceses of Argyll and the Isles, otherwise Lismore and Sodor, were largely cut off from the rest of Scotland by geographical features and linguistic difficulties. The diocese of Argyll had been carved out of Dunkeld before 1200 on the petition of the bishop who "did not understand the language of the people of those parts, and they knew only their mother tongue".¹ The diocese of Sodor or the Isles was ecclesiastically the suffragan of Trondheim, but was also claimed by York. The succession of purely Scottish bishops did not begin until 1426.²

Even in the fifteenth century, however, vestiges of earlier influences may still be discerned in these areas. This may be illustrated from the history of Iona, which had been erected by Reginald, lord of the Isles before 1203, along with a companion nunnery for Benedictine nuns founded before 1208.³

At the turn of the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries the abbot was a certain Fingonius Fingonii (Fingon, son of Fingon) of the Mackinnon Clan, who had succeeded in 1357 on the resignation or death of Abbot Peter. His election had been confirmed by William Bishop of Sodor in the Manx succession; but forty years later he found it convenient to obtain a second confirmation.⁴ Fingon was described by the seventeenth century historian of the Macdonalds as the Green Abbot, a "subtle and wicked counsellor", who stirred up trouble against the Lord of the Isles, for which he "was all his lifetime confined at Icolmkill".⁵

¹ J. Dowden, *Bishops of Scotland*, 377.

² *Ibid.* 289; A. I. Dunlop, *The Apostolic Camera and Scottish Benefices*, 8, 18n.

³ D. Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses—Scotland*, 52, 127.

⁴ *Highland Papers*, (Scottish History Society), iv, 135-6, 149-151.

⁵ *Highland Papers*, i, 32-33, 83.

In 1405 the claustral prior, John Goffredi (John son of Godfrey), whose name suggests a Manx connection, brought a report to the Pope that Abbot Fingon maintained a concubine, had endowed three daughters with large dowries and had dilapidated and destroyed the monastery to the value of 500 marks of silver: whereupon the Pope appointed the Bishops of Glasgow and Dunkeld on a commission of enquiry with power to depose.¹ Presumably the charges proved true, for John Goffredi succeeded as Abbot; and on his death in 1421 the convent elected one of their number, Dominicus Kenichi (Dominic, son of Kenneth), in priest's orders, who was confirmed in possession by Richard Bishop of Sodor.² This was Richard Messing, formerly Bishop of Dromore, obviously in the English succession of Bishops of Sodor, who had been provided by the Anti-Pope, John XXIII.³

Abbot Dominic seems also to have had the support of the Lord of the Isles, although there is no record of that potentate's personal interference in the affairs of the Abbey. The election was, however, contested by the Mackinnon Clan in the person of another Fingonius, a grandson of the Green Abbot.⁴

To meet the menace of the Mackinnons, Abbot Dominic appealed to Rome for papal confirmation. This in turn had unforeseen consequences. It brought to the notice of the Apostolic Camera that the monastery was "not found taxed" in its books; an inquisition was set up to assess the taxation; and Abbot Dominic was still paying his instalments seven years later.⁵

The Isles were obviously being drawn into the net of papal centralisation. Thus, Dominic, monk of Iona, from the Isles "in the ends of the habitable world", came to the Roman Court not without the greatest labours, dangers and expense, and remained there much time awaiting a grace from the Pope, "and has gone through almost all his money". He therefore sought dispensation to hold a benefice, even if he should be elected Abbot.⁶

Meanwhile Abbot Dominic on his return continued to have trouble from the rival faction. On 26 June, 1426, he and the convent petitioned

¹ *Highland Papers*, iv, 156-8.

² *CPL*, VII, 194.

³ Dowden, *Bishops*, 288.

⁴ *CPL*, IX, 407-409.

⁵ *Scottish Benefices*, 3, 6, 9, 10, 261 (2).

⁶ *Highland Papers*, IV, 174-175.

that the Pope "would grant them the privilege that henceforth no noble be received into the monastery as a monk or brother without the unanimous consent of the Abbot and convent, since certain noble abbots who have presided in the said monastery kept noblewomen as concubines, had offspring by them and dowered them with the goods of the said monastery, so that it will never be able to regain its pristine state but will be totally destroyed if such nobles are admitted as monks, as they wish to enter only that they may receive service from, not that they may give service to, God and man,—unless they be such nobles of whom there can be no suspicion or fear of incontinence.¹

Fingon, son of Fingon and grandson of the Green Abbot, said to be a student of canon law, was cited as the chief evil-doer; and the upshot was a long, complicated and bitter struggle between Abbot Dominic and the Mackinnons.² Fingon declared that the Abbot had extracted an oath from him that he would never seek to enter the monastery as a monk. He also then sought the support of Pope Martin V, who on 10 July, 1426, gave a mandate to the abbot of Dunfermline and two canons of Lismore to enquire and to relax him from his vow if they found the allegations to be true.³ The mandataries fulfilled their commission; Fingon was admitted as a monk, and the abbot and convent were excommunicated.⁴

In 1431 Pope Martin died; and the abbot and convent petitioned his successor, Eugenius IV on 18th December, 1443, to the effect that Fingon, son of Fingon, had impetrated letters by pretext of which John, Bishop of Sodor and Duncan, canon of Lismore, had caused the habit to be given to him by three novices of the monastery.

According to Abbot Dominic, Fingon, son of Fingon, then heaped evils upon evils. He made a pact with a certain Mariota to take her daughter as his concubine and to pay a dowry in cattle, lands, viands and clothing; he appropriated monastic property; and by his incontinence had rendered himself hateful to the convent, to the Lord of the Isles (its patron) and to the other neighbouring potentates. Abbot Dominic further declared that the Lord of the Isles by letters patent asserted that if Fingon Fingonii were received he could not in conscience support the monastery and might remove the sepulchres of his forebears; in addition the Abbot claimed the support of James King of Scots and of the chieftains of the Isles.⁵

¹ *Cal. Scot. Suppl.*, ii, 139.

² *CPL*, IX, 407-409.

³ *CPL*, VII, 465.

⁴ *CPL*, IX, 408.

⁵ *Reg. Supp.*, 393, fo. 178v.

In response to this petition the Pope gave mandate to the Bishop of Ossero to try the case, and if found to be true to annul the letters issued to Fingon Fingonii and compel him to demit the habit, and to do all things necessary without appeal, and, if need were, to call in the aid of the secular arm.¹

Here the story stops short; but if Fingon, son of Fingon, had to submit to Dominic, son of Kenneth, the final round was destined to go to the Mackinnons. The last of the old line of Abbots was a Mackinnon, John Macfingon, who died in 1500, and whose effigy is still to be seen in Iona.² In 1498, on the initiative of the Earl of Argyll, a letter was sent to the Pope, asking that the Abbacy of Colmkyll should be erected into the Bishop's seat of the Isles, "quhil his principall kirk in the Ile of Man be recoverit fra Inglismen"; and on 15 June, 1499, the abbacy of Iona was granted to the Bishop of the Isles *in commendam*.³

The Earls of Argyll had succeeded the Lords of the Isles as the principal local magnates. The line of the Lords of the Isles, patrons of Iona, had come to an end in 1494.⁴ No longer would the Abbots look to the Macdonalds to further their cause at Rome as they had done earlier in the century. For example, in December, 1421, the Lord of the Isles had petitioned on behalf of the monastery that three named vicarages might be united to it on the ground that the monastery was "sinking to irreparable ruin" and could not adequately provide for the monks "and for the maintaining of hospitality, which according to the custom of the country they are bound, even unwillingly, to observe."⁵

This emphasis on the burden of hospitality illustrates a characteristic of the church in this area. Thus, on 24 November, 1421, Adam Dominici, vicar of Kilviceuen, chaplain of the Lord of the Isles, sought dispensation to hold a second benefice, "especially because it is the custom in those parts—to hold free hospitality for God's sake."⁶ At the same time his brother, Dominic Dominici, complained that the monks of Iona "scarcely have bread, barley or ale, on account of the continual hospitality there maintained."⁷ Again, on 5 March, 1423, the rector of St Maclrubha of

¹ CPL, IX, 407-409.

² *Highland Papers*, i, 86; John MacFingon was a councillor of the Lord of the Isles (*Origines*, II, i, 291).

³ *RSS*, I, No. 184; *Highland Papers*, IV, 185.

⁴ *Scots Peerage*, v, 47.

⁵ *Cal. Scot. Supp.*, i, 271-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 268-269.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

Melfort, Argyll diocese, stressed that "it is the custom in those parts to entertain pilgrims and others freely with food and drink."¹

In a similar mode on 14 February, 1420, the vicar of St Bedan in Benderloch [Balliveodan] petitioned that he might hold the treasurership of Argyll along with the said vicarage, "because they are incompatible and they have not great fruits" and because he has to maintain a certain poors' hospital and gratuitously sustain all who serve therein."² On 13 February, 1420, the rector of the parish church of St Columba in Glassary petitioned the Pope to unite the vicarage to the rectory, because "according to the custom of Scotland he is bound to give hospitality to all who come to the place of the said parish church, and freely to afford them the necessary food and drink, for which the fruits of the rectory are not sufficient."³

Another characteristic of this area which may stem from an earlier Celtic practice can be discerned at a parochial level. Parish churches, for example, are commonly designated by the name of the patron Saint, to which the name of the territorial district is sometimes added; but seldom, if ever, is a territorial parish named without reference to its patron Saint. Thus the three parish churches which the Pope was asked to unite to the monastery of Iona in 1421 were given as St Columba of Sorby in Tyrgyd, the Holy Maidens and St Columba of Mule:—namely the parishes of Sorby in Tiree, Kilfinichen and Kilcolmkil in Mull.⁴

On 24 November of the same year Adam Dominici is described as perpetual vicar of the parish church of St Eugenius in Rossie, Sodor diocese (Kilviceuen); and this seems to be the earliest reference to the patron Saint of this parish. Cosmo Innes thought the church was dedicated "to some unknown saint."⁵

On 17 December, 1427, Donald Dominici Matanerelegwi, vicar of the parish church of St Cathan of Gyga, Sodor diocese, stated that he had had mandate of provision to the parish church of St Coman, said diocese. It is left to the reader to find out that these are the parish churches of Kilchattan in Gigha and Kilchoman in Islay.

In attitude as well as organisation these areas could demonstrate regional differences and while the sins of concubinage and illegitimacy

¹ *Cal. Scot. Supp.*, ii, 7-8.

² *Ibid.*, i, 174-5.

³ *Ibid.*, i, 173.

⁴ *Ibid.*, i, 271.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 269 and n.

stigmatised the clergy in all parts of fifteenth century Scotland, it is probable that the stigma was not so great in the Highlands and Islands. What was the local attitude in Tiree to the priest who "was not ashamed to keep a certain woman with him in his house as his concubine, by whom he has had offspring burdening the earth", and who was accused of negligence towards one of his parishioners who died without confession or the administration of the sacraments?¹

Language made another barrier. Thus in 1441 the Pope was petitioned to deprive James de Lawedre from the parish church of Disert (now Glenorchy), Argyll diocese, "inasmuch as he is utterly ignorant of the dialect accustomed to be spoken in that church, whereby he is unable to preach the Word of God to the parishioners, hear confessions and fittingly administer the sacraments, to the no little danger of the soul's weal of the said parishioners."² Almost at the same time a certain John de Dunnovin, a non-resident, desired to exchange the archdeaconry of Sodor on the ground that it is among the islands of the sea and that his health could not stand living continually by the sea. Moreover, although he knows how to speak the tongue of that country, yet he does not know it sufficiently to instruct the people and preach the Word of God in that rude dialect.³

From this rather sketchy and incomplete study the picture that emerges shows us that though the dioceses of Argyll and the Isles were cut off from the main stream of Scottish life by the circumstances of geography and language, they were nevertheless a part of the greater life of the nation and of Latin Christendom.

¹ Reg. Supp., 377, fo. 82v.

² *Ibid.*, 375, fo. 104v.

³ *Ibid.*, 377, fo. 274.